

# Core Concepts

Division of Juvenile Corrections

Moving Forward Together

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## Secondary Trauma

Secondary trauma, or secondary traumatic stress, is the emotional stress or symptoms of trauma that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another. Any professional who works directly with traumatized children or youth, and is in a position to hear the recounting of traumatic experiences, is at risk of secondary traumatic stress. Its symptoms mimic those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Individuals affected by secondary stress may find themselves re-experiencing personal trauma or notice an increase in arousal and avoidance reactions related to the indirect trauma exposure. They may also experience changes in memory and perception; alterations in their sense of self-efficacy; a depletion of personal resources; and disruption in their perceptions of safety, trust, and independence.



Other names for secondary trauma with related conditions include:

Compassion Fatigue—a condition characterized by a gradual lessening of compassion over time

Vicarious Trauma—changes in the inner experience of the worker resulting from empathic engagement with a traumatized client

Burnout—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced feeling of personal accomplishment

Corrections Fatigue—the gradual wear-and-tear of the spirit, soul and body of a corrections worker as they adapt to the demands of their workplace and career

### Emotional Indicators

- Anger
- Sadness
- Prolonged grief
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Emotional numbing
- Feelings of hopelessness

### Physical Indicators

- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Lethargy
- Hyper-arousal
- Increased fatigue
- Illness

### Personal Indicators

- Self-isolation
- Cynicism
- Mood swings
- Irritability with spouse, family or friends
- Social withdrawal

### Workplace Indicators

- Avoidance of certain clients
- Missed appointments
- Tardiness
- Lack of motivation
- Reduced productivity
- Job dissatisfaction
- Increased job turnover

*“It is one of the most beautiful compensations in life, that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.”*

*— Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## Coping with Symptoms of Secondary Trauma

Identifying and working through symptoms of secondary trauma can be overwhelming, but manageable, especially if a worker creates a self-care plan. Here are some ideas for self-care and coping with symptoms in different areas of your life:

**Emotional**—increase self-awareness and label your emotions, find a healthy outlet for your emotions (like keeping a journal or talking to a therapist) and listen to your thoughts



**Physical**—eat and drink regularly, exercise, sleep well, take vacations, and get regular medical care

**Personal**—spend time with friends and family, stay connected with others, participate in your community, become a part of a team sport/activity, seek positive people and learn to ask for help, implement regular mini-escape in your life

**Workplace**—take a break during the day, have lunch away from your desk, seek supervision/consultation, set limits with clients, set limits with coworkers, solve little problems, be realistic and flexible and be aware of your limitations

**Psychological**— seek a balanced life with work, friends, family, play and rest, make time for self-reflection, engage in relaxing activities, adopt a positive attitude

## Breathing Exercise

Breathing exercises are a great tool for relaxation that can be used anywhere, anytime.

- Find a place where you can relax, choose a relaxation exercise that you enjoy and get into a comfortable position and begin.
- Sit up comfortably in your chair. Try to have your feet on the floor and your arms in your lap.
- Close your eyes or fix your eyes on a spot on the floor or wall.
- Slowly relax your body.
- Begin to inhale through your nose if possible. Imagine the air filling in the lower part of your abdomen first, then the middle and top part of your chest. Do this slowly, over 5 to 7 seconds.
- Hold your breath for a second or two.
- Relax and let the air out.
- Wait a few seconds and repeat this cycle for 5-10 minutes.



## Did you know...?

Comprehensive, confidential services are available to you and your family through LifeMatters, the Employee Assistance Program for State of Wisconsin employees. This includes counseling, financial consultation, legal consultation, WorkLife Complete and much more. For more information: 1-800-634-6433 or <https://www.mylifematters.com/>

### More resources:

National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Secondary Traumatic Stress Committee. (2011). *Secondary traumatic stress: A fact sheet for child-serving professionals*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute. (2011). *The Resilience Alliance: Promoting Resilience and Reducing Secondary Trauma Among Child Welfare Staff*. New York, NY: Department of Psychiatry, New York University Langone Medical Center.

## For more information...

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